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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGER: DECEMBER 18 REPUBLIC OF NIGER (RON) JUBILEE

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¶1. Summary. The RON celebrated its 50th anniversary with week-long (December 14-20) festivities in the regions of Tillabery and Niamey. There were cultural/sports events, a parade (including a display of security/military hardware), a banquet hosted by Government of Niger (GON) President Tandja at the Presidential Palace, and sensational firework exhibitions. With the exception of brief remarks at the National Day parade to decorate several persons with medals of merit (including a former U.S. Peace Corps volunteer (PCV) from the 1960s era), President Tandja was a spectator and made no remarks at any of the other National Day public events. President Tandja's televised speech on the eve (December 17) of Republic Day paid homage to members of security forces felled in hostilities in northern Niger. He cited several infrastructure projects as examples of progress made over the course of calendar year 2008. Though widely anticipated, there was no mention of elections in 2009. Governor of Tillabery Idder Adamou delivered the only official remarks on the night of the December 16 cultural event, mostly laudatory of the President Tandja's efforts. End summary.

¶2. The Nigerien Minister of Youth and Sports Aldourahamane Seydou was named the National Coordinator for the 50th Anniversary festivities, though planning for the Tillabery venues were largely in collaboration with Governor Amadou. GON President Tandja attended all the public events. Most activities were cultural or sportive in nature, with venues in the regions of Tillabery and Niamey. There were four signature events. The first event was the December 16 cultural night in Tillabery, with a mobilization of the Government of Niger (Cabinet Ministers, National Assembly Members, other governmental institutions), the diplomatic corps, members of civil society and the general public to Tillabery (about 115 kilometers/70 miles from Niamey). The event featured youth performances around the theme of agricultural life in Tillabery, dances characteristic of the various ethnic groups from the eight regions of Niger, and a spectacular, 15-minute closing fireworks exhibition.

¶3. The second event was the December 18 civil and military parade that featured youth, union members, civil society groups, security and military personnel marching, dancing or performing stunts. At the parade, GON President Tandja decorated several persons for distinguished service to the nation, including a gold medal to former PCV, Dr. William Kirker, for work in the health sector. Dr. Kirker opened a health facility in the region of Diffa, in his former PCV service village, Maine Soroa, that also is President Tandja's home town. National Junior Soccer Team Coach/Trainer, Frederic Acosta, also was decorated for leading the junior team to its first ever qualification (in 41 years of federation membership)

for the Africa Cup of Nations scheduled to take place in Algiers in 2009. The Presidential Guard security forces conducted stunts on motorcycles and the security, public safety and military services displayed hardware (e.g., riot gear, tanks, fire trucks, vehicles, helicopters, light aircraft, etc.).

¶4. The third event was President Tandja's dinner at the Presidential Palace, catered by the Grand Hotel for one thousand guests (mostly government institutions, diplomatic corps and international organization representatives and members of civil society). Several well-known Nigerien singing groups and one group from Burkina Faso performed for guests and the night concluded with another spectacular, 15-minute fireworks show. The final event was the December 19 Hippodrome event, with a couple hundred riders mounted on elaborately dressed camels from Tahoua region and horses from Diffa (President Tandja's home region) ornate in armor of bright colors and silver. The riders had the camels and horses perform various maneuvers and equestrian stunts, respectively.

¶5. The President's December 17 televised remarks on the eve of RON Day were brief. First, he paid homage to the fallen members of security and military forces, casualties of the hostilities in northern Niger. Second he cited as accomplishments for the year, the launch of several infrastructure projects: the Kandadji Dam, a second bridge (being built by the Chinese) in Niamey, an oil refinery (being built by the Chinese), a dairy, a cement factory, roads, rural electrification, and a plan to launch in 2009 the construction of a dry port in the Dosso region. Despite speculation that President Tandja, as he enters the last year of his mandate, might use the National Day celebration to mention elections anticipated for 2009, he didn't speak a word about 2009 elections.

¶6. A December 21 event that was scheduled to occur at the Supreme Court to celebrate the fourth anniversary of President

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Tandja's investiture in his second five-year term was cancelled late night December 20. Curiously, the void for that event was filled with a rally of thousands of supporters calling for an extension of Tandja's term of office (to be reported septel). Subsequent to the rally, numerous opposition party leaders and civil society groups voiced opposition to a prolongation of Tandja's mandate, labeling such calls a lack of respect for the Nigerien Constitution.

¶7. Overall, Nigeriens proudly celebrated the Republic's jubilee with week-long festivities, but the jubilation was slightly clouded by the lingering uncertainty about the 2009 elections.

¶8. Tripoli minimize considered.

ALLEN